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Ibsen's Lost Body

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Abstract

This paper investigates what is happening with Henrik Ibsen's plays when they are blended with the Sanskrit theatre tradition. The main finding is that the form-dominance of the performances implies that Ibsen's textual body is reduced to the extent that it can be termed 'Ibsen's lost body'. However, the transcreated texts make up merely a small portion of the performance bodies, and the storylines of the selected excerpts of Ibsen's texts are largely maintained through various types of non-verbal communication techniques characterizing the theatrical forms. Based on an 'open door' notion, macrocosm theatricality is transformed into microcosm artistic expressions through transcultural negotiation processes aiming at removing the tension between 'self 'and 'other'. The 'intentio' of the theatre productions is thus to resound Ibsen's plays in ways that communicate with the local audience, not to reproduce them. Two-way communication between performers and the audience contributes to the strength and dynamics of the performances. The essay is based on the author's understanding developed through his experience as a theatre director, a researcher on intercultural theatre, and adviser to several international Ibsen conferences and theatre festivals in South Asia since 1996. The empirical examples presented facilitate understanding of the nerve of the performativity within the translation parameter of Ibsen's 'lost body'.

Keywords

Intentio; Lokadharmi; Natyadharmi; Open door; Politics in aesthetics; Transcultural negotiation; Theatre of roots; Transcreation

1. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's plays have been staged in South Asia since the 1950s. The fresh and broadened interest in his plays the last decades is mainly due to the prevailing socio-political relevance of the plays in the respective countries, and the plays are increasingly staged in adapted or transcreated versions. The texts are thus not merely used as texts. They are rather becoming artistic tools and materials used for awareness raising, social change, and development. This applies to artistic expressions within urban theatre as well as to alternative theatre for development. A recent phenomenon is that the interest in Ibsen's works is no longer limited to his social plays.

Most Ibsen productions in the region are examples of 'simple forms of cultural encountering'. Ibsen's texts are in such cases crossing borders in the form of translations or mere adaptations to a new situation, time, and space. The structure of the plays and their realistic notion are maintained. The productions are dialogue-based and made in the proscenium format, making use of modern Western performance techniques and acting styles. However, even when the intention is to in remain loyal to Ibsen's text, there will always be 'deviations' from the original.

Adaptation becomes much more challenging when a Western play is blended with other theatrical forms (whether Indian, Japanese, Chinese, or others). Such blending can be called 'complex forms of cultural encountering' (Nilu, 2010). New artistic expressions are created by blending the content (ideas, texts) from one culture with entire forms (or elements of forms) from another cultural tradition. Non-western theatrical forms are very different from modern

Western theatre: The concept of total theatre is common and means that communication with the audience takes place in various ways, not only—or mainly—through dialogue as in Western theatre. Non-western theatre is narrative in form, contains a different dramatic structure, and is usually highly stylized. Complex forms of cultural encountering require huge amounts of negotiation between the Western texts and these forms.

The purpose of this essay is to reinvestigate the cultural border crossing processes when Henrik Ibsen's texts are blended with the Sanskrit theatrical tradition, folk forms as well as classical forms. This is done from two different angles: the merging of different social plays with folk theatrical forms, and the use of one play, *Peer Gynt*, within different Sanskrit theatrical forms. The reinvestigation is limited to how the blending is done and what happens to Ibsen's texts. It is important to look into how theatre directors make use of Ibsen's dialogues and present the psychological aspects of his characters and how they relate Ibsen's aesthetics with Sanskrit (Indian) theatre aesthetics. A crucial aspect is the freedom exercised within the performances to combine substances from the text and the theatrical form.

During the exploration, I kept in mind Ibsen's comment in a letter to his publisher in 1882 after *Gengangere* had been heavily criticized: 'My book contains the future.' I consider this phrase as 'the spirit of Ibsen' in the sense that it expresses an 'open door' concept, with freedom at its core.

2. Ibsen crossing borders

Ibsen's plays are ambiguous and invite a pluralistic notion of performativity. They consist of many layers and are full of emblematic material, which make the plays open for interpretation and reapplication in line with the cultural conceptions and socio-political conditions of each country or community.

To ensure contemporary relevance and easy communication with the audience, it is essential that Ibsen's plays become local. As expressed by Homi K. Bhabha (2014):

> Cultural performance is not what world literature is but what it does; more textual process than literary object, it is an attempt to free it from its traditional national-cultural entitlements and to focus on the cultural enactments that result from the transnational pressure of the textual play of absorbed foreign elements.

Reflections on the metamorphic power of art through an emphasis on openness has turned out to be a useful approach within research on theatre practice. This is related to the process which Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014) has called 'transformative aesthetics', the purpose of which is 'to generate the greatest possible openness'. Fisher-Lichte (1996) has also underscored the necessity of this kind of transformation or transplantation:

> The use of foreign elements, or the adaptation of them in a production, is thus always to be understood as a process of cultural transformation in which the components extracted from the other culture are embedded in the own culture so that their special potential can unfold in the here and now.

The transformation process is about 'translation', 'adaptation', and 'transculturation' within the performance body (Nilu, 2016):

> Ibsen's texts have been crossing the borders with the help of artistic vehicles; the texts have got another cultural expression and layer.

The intention is to create symbiotic positions of cultures in Ibsen practice. They serve to remove the tension between 'self' and 'other' from the performance body (Nilu, 2021).

The transformation process can be seen as a migratory journey within the culture and between cultures. It contains negotiation processes at different levels, centering on the psychophysical displacement and replacement of cultural materials. It is a matter of artistic choice. The process gives rise to a creative dynamic between reading and misreading (related to cultural conceptions), and between understanding and misunderstanding (cultural conceptions, metaphorical use, linguistic of the source text). The outcome of this transcultural process is the appropriation and misappropriation of Ibsen's text. Translation and adaptation will thus always mean that there are deviations from the source text (Helland, 2009).

The transcultural process is usually guided by the aim of communicating with a new audience. As pointed out by Frode Helland (2015):

> When a dramatic text moves from one culture to another, it does so because it can function in the new cultural context - it can 'speak' to a new audience, in a new and different situation.

As we will see below, the form and degree of 'deviation' vary. Within complex forms of cultural encountering, 'deviation' is not only a matter of adapting to a new socio-political and cultural context but also to the theatrical form used.

3. Ibsen's 'Lost Body' within the Sanskrit theatre tradition

The blending of Ibsen's texts with the Sanskrit theatre tradition means that we are faced with 'complex forms of cultural encountering'. The performance score, the mode, and the expressions are different from practicing Ibsen in the West or in urban areas of India, Bangladesh and other South Asian countries.

Theatre in the region was from the beginning narrative in form, with recitation, singing, and dancing as integral parts. Sanskrit aesthetics is the root, and the major reference is Bharata's *Natyasastra.* Kapila Vatsyayan (1996) highlights total theatre as the major characteristic of Sanskrit theatre:

> (Sanskrit theatre is) drama and theatre with all its components of speech, word, body language, gesture, costuming, décor, and the inner states or temperaments.

Natyasastra formulates two different styles (Rangacharya, 1998): 'Lokadharmi' (non-presentational style) and 'Natyadharmi' (presentational style). For the sake of easy understanding, it can be said that 'Lokadharmi' consists of folk theatrical forms, and 'Natyadharmi' is a classical form. Whereas the two styles differ in terms of the degree of performance rules and stylization as well as openness to improvisation, both are narrative and constitute total theatre. Use of mobile handheld curtains is a major characteristic of Sanskrit theatre (Metha, 1999). It is a rectangular and decorated piece of cloth which is held by two stage assistants. The curtain is used for several purposes, most important for space shifting and in connection with the entry and exist of characters. Costumes, masks, and colour are used to symbolize the characters and their psycho-physical condition.

The narrative quality of a performance is, more than mere storytelling, a kind of score for visual enactment of the physical, mental, and emotional activities inherent in the story or the episodes. It is a game between description and presentation which is connected to incidents, situations, characters, the temporal as well as the cause-effect conjunction. Storytelling actors are transforming into new characters or new situations. In terms of verbal expression, the forms are verse-dominated, and few phrases, if any, are in dialogue form. The interaction is triangular—between actor, musician, and audience. There is no space for making realistic expressions—Sanskrit theatre is anti-illusionistic.

The emphasis on narrative elements makes Indian theatre theatrical. It encompasses all the other forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentation—literature, mime, music, dance, movement, painting, sculpture, and architecture—all mixed into one which is called 'Natya' or 'theatrical' in English. 'Rasa' (sentiment) and 'Bhavas' (transitory or transferable stages) are the core of Sanskrit theatre aesthetics with their performativity of body and facial gestures ('Angika Abhinaya'), verbal expressions through poetic recitation, dialogue, and music ('Vacika Abhinaya'), costumes, makeup, and physical decorations ('Aharya Abhinaya'), and inner emotions ('Sāttvika Abhinaya').

In opposition to the dominance of modern Western theatre in urban areas of India, Indian theatre researchers and practitioners emphasizing the postcolonial characteristics of their country highlight the importance of "their own theatre". They commonly refer to Sanskrit theatre as 'theatre of roots', a term coined by Suresh Awasthi (2009).

It will emerge from the discussion of the Sanskrit performances below that they are form-based. The complex cultural encounter implies that Ibsen's texts are reduced and simplified and that it is not possible to maintain Ibsen's dramatic structure. The main points of the storylines are, however, usually maintained through verbal expressions other than dialogue and through various non-verbal techniques. In this way, Ibsen's text is naturalized, in line with Jacques Derrida's approach 'nothing is translatable; nothing is untranslatable' (2021). Homi K. Bhabha (2014) uses the term 'mind crossing borders' which he sees as 'the labor of cultural translation', and he also reminds us about Walter Benjamin's view that such border crossing always (is) 'work-in-*progress*', and a 'work-in-*process*'.

The 'lost body' is the result of the socio-political-cultural negotiation process whereby Ibsen's texts undergo transformation, transplantation, and transfiguration within the frame of 'politics in aesthetics' (Nilu, 2022). As Walter Benjamin (2021) says,

in order to allow its own mode of '*intentio* to resound, not as the *intentio* to reproduce, but rather as harmony, as a complement to the language in which it is communicated.

3.1 Ibsen in the 'Lokadharmi' tradition (non-presentational style)

Traditional folk theatrical forms in India and Bangladesh are part of the oral tradition. They belong to the 'Lokadharmi' performance mode of Sanskrit theatre aesthetics. Traditional folk theatre is a composite art, with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, religion, and rituals and may also include graphic and plastic arts, and agricultural festivity material. The nature of the performance is always musical, but each folk theatrical form has a particular community, language, area, and way of life. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Sufism, and Saivism have had great influence on the thematic structure of most folk theatrical forms.

Theatre as a form of communication is a deep-rooted tradition in Bangladesh and India. Traditional folk theatre has roots in native culture and is embedded in local identity and social values. It provides mass entertainment and has also served as an important tool for interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-village communication. It is common for these forms that the major action and interaction happen between the main narrator and the audience, often through the intervention of sub-narrators.

The examples described below describe how religion-based folk theatrical forms can be used to propagate contemporary social, political, and cultural issues, based on Ibsen's social plays.

3.1.1 *Ghosts* merged with the folk form 'Kushan Gan'

The Bangladeshi production *Adrishya Pap* (literal meaning 'Invisible Sin'), an adaptation of *Ghosts* (*Gengangere*), is performed in the religion-based popular theatrical form 'Kusan Gan'. It was created by a travelling marginal theatre company from the remote area of Rangpur District in the Northern part of Bangladesh. The play is directed by Golam Sarwar, and the actors are traditional artists. The performance was staged at the International Ibsen Festival in Dhaka in 2009, organized by the Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT) in collaboration with the Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, and Bangladesh Academy of Fine and Performing Arts, and supported by the Norwegian Embassy, Dhaka. The idea of the festival was to explore how socio-political issues dealt with in Ibsen's plays could be presented to the present-day Bangladeshi audience through new artistic expressions (Nilu, 2014).

'Kushan Gan' (Ahmed, 2000) is a popular theatrical form in which episodes from the *Ramayana* are enacted. It is performed in festivals of major Hindu deities, including Kali and Bhagavati (Durga). It usually takes place in the temple precinct or in the outer courtyard of homesteads. The temporary performance space is shaped as an open and empty square, with spectators sitting on all four sides.

Music is the major tool of communication in a 'Kushan Gan' performance. The main elements of the performance consist of narration through songs and music, and dialogue. There is no room for acts or scenes nor for individual characters. The lead narrator ('Mul') and the assisting narrator ('Dohar') describe events and characters and enact some roles, accompanied by choral singers ('Pails'), musicians ('Yantrics'), and female impersonators ('Cyamdas') who dance and enact female roles. The task of the 'Dohar' is to facilitate communication between the performers and the audience which is important to drive the performance forward. A major purpose is to enhance knowledge about religion and myths. In response to requests from the audience, the performers elaborate on aspects of the epic story, including the role of the epic characters. The performance rules are strict and definite, and the spectators are not allowed to raise any sort of critical questions. The performance has no time limit and could sometimes last through the whole night.

Blending a modern text dealing with socio-political issues with 'Kushan Gan', a rule-based religious theatrical form, is very challenging. The only way to succeed was to secularize the form, that is, to shoot out all conventional religious and ritualistic materials from the artistic expression. To do this, the conventional religion-based performance rules had to be broken. In this secularization process, the crucial intervention was to create room for improvisation by developing the role of the 'Dohar' further and by removing the barriers for how the audience could interact. In *Adrishwa Pap,* the 'Dohar' is given the critical task of raising questions on burning socio-political issues in the community to the lead narrator and the audience. The narrator or sub-narrator comments on the hidden aspects of the community and connects the dramatic story of the performance to existing real characters and stories in the community through irony, parody, and humour along with comical gestures to make the performances more relevant and playful. The spectators are free to raise questions about such issues to the performers and even to other members of

the audience. In this way, the active participation of the audience ensures contemporary relevance aa well as contributes to the dynamic of the performance. This is parallel to Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) observation that the performance may transform the spectators into actors.

Ibsen's *Ghosts* was selected because issues raised in this play are still highly relevant in Rangpur communities. The content of the adapted text builds on the central meeting point between Ibsen's play and the prevailing socio-political conditions and cultural conceptions in the rural communities concerned, notably the phrase 'All kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs' from Act 2 of *Ghosts.* This constitutes the backbone of the entire performance body and is in fact the only phrase from Ibsen's text which is incorporated into the new performance text.

The phrase itself is a strong secular expression and represents a rejection of deep-rooted inequalities and fundamentalist religious values and dogmas. It is therefore well suited to reach the target audience since 'All kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs' is the major driver behind inequalities and oppression in village communities dominated by hierarchical power structures and traditional values as well as increasingly by 'political Islam', a political ideology that takes a literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran as a master plan for society (Bradley, 2012). It is also well suited for improvisation in the sense that it can be applied to all kinds of oppressing and abusing situations in the community.

In contrast to religious preaching which traditionally makes up the content of 'Kushan Gan', the emphasis on 'All kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs' in this theatre production serves to point out how they negatively affect the freedom of people in the community and hinder social progress. It was important to select themes and topics in Ibsen's play that are meaningful and acceptable to the local community. The phrase further serves as the guiding principle for the replacement process, including creating new plots and action lines based on the actual conditions in the communities and the use of local images, metaphors, symbols, and proverbs. The replacement of syphilis by HIV is one example of adjustments made to enhance the relevance of the performance. Being a border area, Rangpur has a high HIV/AIDS prevalence.

The last stage of the transformation process, incorporation, is the moment when the performance text is tailored to suit the specific folk theatrical form. 'Kushan Gan' is a fully anti-illusionistic expression with verbal and non-verbal communication techniques. The text is mainly expressed symbolically through gestures, mime, and movement.

'All kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs' is used as a sequential musical refrain throughout the performance. During the musical refrains, the performers make a circular movement to create progress in the story and indicate emotional changes. This also serves to enhance the energy level of the performance.

3.1.2 *The Lady from the Sea* blended with the folk form 'Pabuji Ki Phad'

The production *Mareechika,* an adaptation of *The Lady from the Sea,* from Rajasthan is designed and directed by Ila Arun in collaboration with K.K. Raina. They make use of the traditional theatrical form 'Pabuji Ki Phad'. This is a scroll painting performance based on musical rendition (a particular way of performing a song, piece of music, or poem) of the epic story of Pabuji, the Rathore chief of Rajasthan in the 14th century, who was extolled as an incarnation of a Hindu god and worshipped by the nomadic tribes in Rajasthan. Against a scroll painting ('Phad'), the main singer and narrator (called 'Bhopa') and a female singer ('Bhopi') present the story. The production was staged at Delhi Ibsen Festival 2010, organized by the Dramatic Art & Design Academy in collaboration with

Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, and supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Also in this example, the dramatic text is transfigured according to the structure of the folk form. In the performance, 'Pabuji Ki Phad' is combined with a Rajasthani folk dance, 'Ghoomar', which is typically performed by veiled women performers pirouetting while moving in and out of a wide circle. In terms of content, Ila Arun explains that she wants to speak out about Indian women's freedom, in Ibsen's spirit. The folk dance is used metaphorically to express freedom, like Ibsen's use of the tarantella in *A Doll's House*.

3.1.3 Learning from blending with 'Lokadharmi'

It turns out that the directors of the productions have managed to create a space for artistic freedom within the religion-based folk theatrical forms. Openness to improvisation is a critical aspect. The room for artistic freedom provides an opportunity to decontextualize Ibsen's textual material and incorporate it into the folk theatrical forms. Due to the opposite hemispheric placement and the fundamental difference between Ibsen's text and the Sanskrit performance 'Lokadharmi' style, it was an essential task to erase elements from the source text and incorporate new elements to ensure that the content and form would fit together. New ideas are incorporated into the performances through a filtration process of assimilation and appropriation of cultural materials, with the aim of creating a secularized

condition. Ibsen's texts are adapted or transcreated to adjust to local socio-political conditions and cultural conceptions, including changes in location and names as well as of metaphors, images, and symbols.

Cultures have different codes for social interaction, and theatrical expressions, therefore, differ in terms of tempo, rhythm, body expressions, meaning of gestures, use of voice, colour symbols, etc. The blending of the adapted texts with the 'Lokadharmi' theatrical forms implies that the structure and performance score of Ibsen's texts had to be changed. The texts were substantially reduced and transformed from dialogue to other forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, in line with the concept of total theatre. In this way, the spirit of Ibsen's corpus, freedom, and the storylines of the selected plays were largely maintained. Adaptation to the socio-cultural milieu of the audience is a prerequisite for communicating well with the local audience and ensuring the relevance of the performances. The transcreations of *Ghost*s (*Adrishya Pap*) and *The Lady from the Sea* (*Mareechika*) deal with burning issues in the communities. The role of the narrator or sub-narrator in asking questions about inequalities and other problems in the local community ensures the relevance of the performances. Communication with the audience is also facilitated by maintaining the vernacular language and the crudities and vulgarities that typically characterize these theatrical forms.

By and large, the performances are examples of successful intercultural performances as described by Marvin Carlson (1996):

> Foreign elements are assimilated into the tradition and absorbed by it. The audience can be interested, entertained or stimulated by these elements, but they are not challenged by them. Often they do not even recognize them as foreign.

The major challenge in the negotiation process was that the textual material was alien to the artistic form. The crucial border crossings were artistic as well as political, social, cultural, psychological, and lastly religious. The first critical task is the selection of the play and the artistic form to be blended. It was necessary to overcome several obstacles throughout the negotiation process, and perspectives and selections had to be reconsidered at several stages of the journey to ensure that the performances would be meaningful to artists and target audiences. This process was very demanding due to features characterizing the stakeholders and their communities. The stakeholders are from remote areas, mostly illiterate and living below the poverty line. Moreover, they are trapped in religion, social taboos, and prejudices and controlled by community leaders, unseen political forces, and criminals within a highly stratified social structure.

3.2 Ibsen between tradition and contemporaneity: Peer Gynt cycle

This part of the essay is based on the project 'Ibsen between tradition and contemporaneity: Peer Gynt cycle', a collaboration between the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Hyderabad, and the Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, carried out in 2015 with partial financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The intention was to provide an arena where scholars and theatre practitioners working closely on Ibsen in non-conventional ways could interact to learn from each other and further explore cross-cultural approaches to Ibsen's works within the Sanskrit performance tradition.

The project focuses on only one play, notably the verse drama *Peer Gynt.* Four productions applying *Peer Gynt* within the 'Lokadharmi' and 'Natyadharmi' performance traditions were commissioned. The focus on one play provides an opportunity to explore how theatre directors apply Ibsen's poetics within some South Indian Sanskrit theatrical forms. Rajiv Velicheti (2016), a project member, describes the overall challenges:

> *Peer Gynt* which defies that bias and builds a bewildering structure of myth, fantasy, and politics, is an interesting challenge in itself. It is compounded by the necessity to confront the traditional forms of four south Indian languages. All four directors have taken very different approaches to both challenges. The differences arise not only from understanding and adapting Ibsen's text but also from the selection and adaptation of the forms, their histories and political significance within the modern identity of the language/region.

3.2.1 *Peer Gynt* transformed into the traditional folk form 'Yakshagana'

The performance *Peeranemba Kiratakana Prasanga* ('Ballad of a Hunter named Peera') is a Kannada adaptation from Karnataka, directed by D. Prasanna. The lyrics is written by Prashanat B. Madhyasta.

'Yakshagana' (literal meaning 'song of nature spirits') is a dance drama. The typical performance consists of

background music played by a group of musicians (known as 'Himmela') and a dance and dialogue group ('Mummela') who enact poetic epics on stage. A storyteller ('Bhagavatha') leads the performance and narrates the story by singing and inviting for dialogue while the actors are dancing to the music, portraying elements of the story. Costumes, makeup, masks (when used), and ornaments are usually elaborate and colourful. Standard character types can be identified by the colour and design of the costumes and the makeup. A large headgear ('Kireeta') indicates a heroic character. 'Yakshagana' was traditionally performed outdoor and only by men. It is now common that women act female characters. 'Yakshagana', in contrast to most other 'Natyadharmi' forms, is relatively flexible, both in the sense that there are many varieties of the form and in the sense that openness to improvisation characterizes all components of the performance (music, dance, dialogue).

A 'Yakshagana' performance depicts a story from the Hindu epics, in particular the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, or from ancient Hindu scriptures ('Puranas'). The theatrical form is strongly influenced by the Vaishnava tradition which focuses on the life of Krishna, a major Hindu god.

The strong folkloristic element in *Peer Gynt* fits well with the 'Yakshagana' form. There are many similarities between the life of Peer in Ibsen's play and the legends of Krishna as lover, divine hero, and universal supreme being. Ibsen's text is reconstructed based on the performance structure of 'Yakshagana'. As is typical for this theatrical form, the performance *Peeranemba Kiratakana Prasanga* is a combination of music (drumming) and dance, songs by the narrator, and dialogue between the narrator, the performers, and the audience. This has an impact on the rhythm and length of the performance text, and the language is less elaborate. In line with 'Vaishnavism', the focus in the production is on Peer's 'self' and 'desire'. These emotions are also represented symbolically with the help of music, costumes, and movement. In the Hindu epics, the desire of the hero is related to power. Likewise, Peer's desire is politically motivated - to become 'Kaiser' and Emperor of the World. In the performance, the backdrop of this desire is India's colonial past.

The performance text is a cultural recreation of selected parts of Ibsen's play and consists of five episodes: The first episode is the dialogue between Peer and his mother (Ibsen's Act 1, Scene 1). The second episode, called 'Peer at the wedding ceremony', makes up a major part of the performance and combines elements from Act 1, Scenes 2 and 3, and Act 2, Scene 1. The third episode is mainly based on Act 1, Scenes 5 and 6. The two last episodes are brief and deal with Peer at the shore of Marocco (Act 4, Scene 1 in Ibsen's play) and Peer's emptiness and self-reflection (based on Act 5 in Ibsen's text), respectively. The storylines are followed, although the text is adapted and considerably shortened. The performance is constructed well within the frame of liminality. The content (desire, self-reflection) fits well with the form. The performance can be considered as a transformative game in the imaginary world, between dream and reality, within the dramatic structure of 'Yakshagana'.

The dramaturgy of the performance grows in line with Peer's ambition of becoming a 'Kaiser'. An interesting feature is that the ambition is intermingled with a central element of the performance body, notably the headgear ('Kireeta'), which is used as an image of Peer's desire. As D. Prasanna (2015) mentions in his directorial note:

> In the play, we took a central idea of Peer Gynt who claims to become a 'Kaiser' (Emperor), and developed this idea in the means of tying a *Kireeta* (Headgear) of *Yakshagana* which grows as his desire grows.

At the end of the performance, Peer's large headgear breaks. This is a replacement for the onion scene in Ibsen's text. Peer encounters himself. He is an empty man, close to the tragic hero Dyryodhana in the *Mahabharata.* Duryodhana's desire is to rule but greed and arrogance cause his downfall. The lost headgear can also be understood as an indirect critic of the religion-based focus on 'Indianness' in the present political scenario, which is an identity marker among Hindus.

Velicheti (2016) interprets the performance within the frame of the contemporary postcolonial body of India:

> *Yakshagana*, considered as a central practice for Kannada culture, is a colourful form. Though it has a long history of evolution, its present contours are formulated in 20th century in response to the homogenizing attitudes of colonialism and nationalism. After Independence, *Yakshagana* became one of the important forms for 'Indianness' as well as Kannada identity, making it an essential part in the theatre practice and training of performers in Karnataka.

3.2.2 *Peer Gynt* as a composite production

The performance *Pethannasami thalutta* from Tamil Nadu was directed by Prof. S. Ramanujam.

The transcreation is based on two theatrical forms: 'Therukkuttu' is a lowbrow folk theatrical form used to educate

rural people about history and religion. 'Kaisikapuranam' was a highbrow classical dance form that Prof. Ramanujam revived over a period of three decades. It was a temple dance based on the *Ramayana* and was performed by high-caste female artists dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or temple ('Devadasis'). It stands out from other theatrical forms as it was performed only by women, who also donned the male characters. This unusual blending of forms gives an opportunity for creating a secular artistic expression by breaking the hierarchical domination of the caste system in Sanskrit performance forms. In a discussion with the director, he explained the unusual combination and appropriation by underlining that the performance text 'moulded to juxtapose the Duryodhana with Peer Gynt from an angle of how the egoism fuses with love and affection of motherhood.'

The performance text is an intermingling of a scene of the classical Sanskrit play *Urubhangam* by Bhasa, the episode with the primary antagonist Dyryodhana of the *Mahabharata,* which is used to establish a situation with a tragic hero and excerpts of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Intertextuality is thus the core of Ramanujam's dramaturgy, and the approach is close to Ila Arun's (2016) view: 'Peer Gynt appeared to me as the two heroes of the Mahabharata, Arjun and Duryodhana, merged into one body.'

The director uses the Aase character in Ibsen's play (Act 1) as an intake to merge the source text with the *Mahabharata*, with the aim of establishing the 'Mother India' concept in the production. As Velicheti (2016) explains:

> a mother's lamentation at the death of a heroic but less than virtuous son is the commonality in the two scenes. The Sanskrit play talks about the death of Duryodhana, a villain in Mahabharata in the lap of his mother Gandhari, who had spent a lifetime blindfolded. The production draws archetypal parallels and focuses on the conflicts of judgements, attachment and forgiving, interpreting the end of *Peer Gynt* in the light of Indian spiritual notion of mukti (means 'freedom').

It is, however, the Solveig character (Act 3, Scene 3, and Act 5, Scenes 6 and 10) which serves as the major inspiration in the elaboration of the motherhood concept in the production. The scenes are carefully selected to establish the Indian concepts of 'Motherhood' and 'Mother India' which are incorporated and highlighted throughout the performance. The identity of the Indian woman is according to tradition designed by her relationship with others (Khumallambam, 2016):

> The dominant psycho-social realities of a woman's life can be condensed into three stages. Firstly, she is a daughter to her parents. Secondly, she is a wife to her husband and daughter-in-law to the husband's parents. Thirdly, she is a mother to her children. In the Hindu society, the ideal woman is represented by Sita, the quintessence of wifely devotion, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*. Sita is the epitome of a true traditional wife who accompanied her husband in his exile in the forest for fourteen years. --- The position, duty and bond of relation of a wife to a husband is an eloquent statement of the dharma of the Hindu wife.

The following slightly adapted dialogue from *Peer Gynt* constitutes the spine of the performance body:

> *Peer Gynt*: My mother - my wife! Oh, purest of women hide me, oh hide me, within your love.
> *Solveig*: Sleep now, dearest son of mine, I will cradle you, I will guard you…we two have been playing all the livelong day.

The emphasis on 'Motherhood' is also seen in the shifting points of the performance body. They consist of a single mantra used as a musical refrain that is equivalent to the 'Gayathri Mantra' of the *Mahabharata*: 'No God equivalent to a mother.'

Through this verse, the director uses the Solveig character to represent 'Bharat Mata' ('Mother India'), which is a national personification of India (Bharat) as a mother goddess, inseparable from the goddesses Durga and Kali. 'Mother India' represents India as a nation and is a central element of the Hindu-based concept of 'Indianness'. This means that the performance has a religious flavour despite the secular notion emerging from the mixing of the two theatrical forms, and the notion of the performance thereby becomes political.

3.2.3 *Peer Gynt* blended with the classical form 'Kudiyattam'

The performance *Peer Gynt* from Kerala is directed by Abhilash Pillai.

'Kudiyattam' is considered as the only remaining Sanskrit theatrical form in India practiced in the region of Kerala (Basheer, 2016). It was traditionally performed as a religious ritual in Hindu temples by and for high-caste Brahmins. The framework of the form contains well-formulated rules. All male roles are played by one sub-caste (Chakyars)

while men from another subcaste (Nangiyars) act as female characters. A special hall for performances ('Koothambalam') was constructed on the temple premises. 'Kudiyattam' is characterized by a sophisticated language of its own, in terms of sound, colour, gestures, and movement, accompanied by a traditional drum, ('Mizhavu'). The performers make use of stylized language emphasizing hand gestures and exaggerated expressions of the face and eyes. Verbal language is limited and mainly in verse form. There is no significant physical interaction between the performers. Set design, props, and backdrops are not used. In terms of content, the Sanskrit plays enacted are mainly based on the Hindu epics.

As Shaik John Basheer (2016) points out: 'While the site and content of a Kudiyattam performance are Sacred, Peer Gynt is an epic of an everywhere man'. The blending of the two requires an enormous amount of negotiation. The result is a performance that is 'in-between'. To make the performance contemporary, Abhilash Pillai's *Peer Gynt* production breaks most of the 'Kudiyattam' conventions. The performance is highly experimental and can be seen as a juxtaposition between tradition and modernity. Modern materials are used in parallel with 'Kudiyattam' materials. The director does not make use of the 'Kudiyattam' form in full but rather borrows artistic materials from it. What remains is mainly the actor whose body is trained in the form, along with the use of the traditional drum. Stylized speech persists but is combined with colloquial language and everyday interaction between the performers. All male characters are played by one traditionally trained 'Kudiyattam' artist while a contemporary modern actress plays all female characters. The musical instruments used in the performance, the traditional drum, and an electrical guitar, are drawn from different cultural contexts. The performance has strong visuals, with a performance installation, formed as a Western wedding gown, in the center of the stage. It serves various functions throughout the performance. The set further consists of a big white installation hanging from the ceiling, like an onion in form, which is used for presenting projected images. Props are also used, including a mechanical robot to portray the son of the Women in Green. Props and costumes are made of waste material. The blend of all these elements relieves the form from its religious content.

Velicheti (2016) observes:

> Pillai refuses to organize elements neatly around a preconceived idea and allows confrontations—between the sound and the action, between visual and speech, between movement and stillness and implicitly, between the traditional and the modern. It is as messy as the contemporary reality.

In contrast to the Sanskrit performance mode, which is episodic, the dramaturgy of this performance is open. In the recreated dramatic text, dialogues from different parts of Ibsen's text are picked and adapted and sometimes used in a different context. The story line of the scenes selected is mainly followed, although the text is substantially shortened, and the order of the scenes is sometimes changed. Various scenes in Acts 2 and 3 of Ibsen's text form a major part of the recreated text. The end takes inspiration from the voyage (Act 5, Scene 5).

Turning to Pillai's dramaturgy, he says in his directorial note (undated): 'It's a journey undertaken by Peer which inevitably has been an inner exploration'. The production deals with the inner life of Peer through a series of characters and events. Dialogues between Peer and Woman in Green are highlighted, along with Peer's interaction with Dovre (the Troll king) and with his mother Aase (in particular the death scene). Fragments of dialogues between Peer and Solveig are spread throughout the play. Peer's inner exploration is further reflected in fragments of dialogues with Voice, Button Molder, and Stranger as well as with Fence and Thief.

In addition to the universal issues dealt with in these dialogues, the contemporary relevance is made explicit through the inclusion of a new element, notably an emphasis on nature. This is seen from multimedia projections of birds and other images of nature, the many forest scenes, and the use of scrap and waste material for costumes and props. The director explained in his directorial note (Pillai, undated), *Peer Gynt* was seen.

> as a text where identity of a person is been associated with many elements particularly in this world of entrepreneurship. So, our basic emphasis is as to how man utilized, distorted, and exploited the nature. This is how we try to bring the strife between the women in Green and Peer.

The performance is multilingual. In addition to Malayalam, it makes use of other regional languages (Assamese, Bengali, Kongini) as well as Hindi. This adds to the socio-political relevance of the performance as it serves to underline the heterogenous position of 'Indianness', in opposition to 'Hindutva', the predominant form of the growing Hindu nationalism in India.

The postcolonial situation is explicit in the performance through the following dialogue in the dramaturgy (Pillai,

undated performance script), based on Act 4, Scene 13 in Ibsen's text:

> *Huhu*: My ancestors are dead without being interpreted (*To Peer*) do you want to hear?
> *Peer*: By all means.
> *Huhu*: Wreathing the land of India - far way is the beach of Malabar; Arabs, The Dutch, Portuguese and British have introduced their civilizations. There are the genuine natives. My language has been massacred. I struggled long to cultivate my language. But few share my belief. The western world wants only flunkies the orient is ruled by monkeys.
> *Hussain*: My history is brief, I will say it once again, I cannot be a blotter, I am a pen.

Velicheti (2016) summarizes the outcome of the production as follows:

It may be said that the humour of the text is lost but the play of conflicting elements compensates for that. The play is designed to disturb and unsettle our notions both about the text and on what a contemporary/traditional performance should look like.

3.2.4 Peer Gynt as a transcultural adaptation in the 'Chindu Bhagavatam' folk form

The performance *Peergynt Chindu Bhagavatam* from Telangana in Andra Pradesh is directed by Dr. Aruna Bhikshu and performed by traditional 'Chindu Bhagavatam' artists belonging to the casteless group (Dalit). This itself breaks the stratification norms of the Indian society as the director belongs to the higher caste group. Aruna Bhikshu (2017) underlines that the form is a social statement of the oppressed:

> Chindu Bhagavatham emerged as the voice of the suppressed and stood as a bold statement questioning social inequality.

'Chindu Bhagavatam' artists initially performed their caste legend ('Jamba Puranam') which was passed orally from generation to generation. Subsequent written texts had typically historical, mythological themes.

Although the acting style is more stylized and costumes more elaborate compared with the folk theatrical forms described in the previous chapter, 'Chindu Bhagavatam' has many similarities with 'Lokadharmi' theatrical forms. The vitality of the 'Chindu Bhagavatam' performance is in the hands of the narrator ('Shutradhara'). He binds the performance together and negotiates spontaneously the duration and course of the performance with the other performers. He also presents the progress of the storyline to the audience. The conductor further acts as a comedian, bringing wit and humor into the performance. It is a characteristic feature of 'Chindu Bhagavatam' that male actors may transform into feminine attributes and act female characters. A unique feature of the form is that the conductor is accompanied by two female chorus singers ('Vanthas'). They play a vital role in the elaboration and condensation of the text on the spot and assist in the progression of the performance. Verbal expressions consist of dialogues, recitations, and songs. The actor also performs as singer and dancer. The movement depends on the rhythm of the text and the singing of the chorus. Spontaneity is a crucial aspect of the movement, although certain patterns are fixed.

According to Bhikshu (2017), the flexibility characterizing the dramaturgy, and the performance body facilitated the merging of 'Chindu Bhagavatam' with *Peer Gynt*:

> The virtual structure of the Chindu Bhagavatam as a lyrical dance drama with intrinsic spontaneity and improvisation, gives vigor for the adaptation of a new text. The flexibility of the form reinforces the vitality of the form thus enabling new originations. 'Peer Gynt' in Chindu Bhagavatam was an exercise of negotiating a foreign 'Text' and accommodating it in an indigenous Telugu folk theatrical form of Telangana.

The performance text is thus transformed and negotiated within their artistic corpus with the help of the rhythm and meter of the Telegu language. The result is a creolized language, within a juncture between tradition and modernity.

Regarding the development of the transcreated text, Bhikshu (2017) explained:

> Contextualizing 'Peer Gynt' in Chindu Bhagavatam stands as a 'travelogue' of the text, form and the performers themselves.

The four qualities of *Peer Gynt* - 'fantasy', 'mysticism', 'symbolism', and 'allegory' - are parallel to the dramatic and performance structures of 'Chindu Bhagavatam'. The folkloristic elements of the first two acts of Ibsen's play

suit well with the form, and the character Peer Gynt has similar attributes as one of their folk heroes. Peer's relationship with his mother and with Solveig, Ingrid, and Woman in Green could easily be portrayed within the form.

Typically, 'Chindu Bhagavatam' performances raise questions about existential issues, in particular human oppression and inequalities, through narration, poetic recitations, songs, and dialogue as well as through body movement. These traditional performance techniques are maintained in the performance. Males act as female characters but a new character, a female friend of Women in Green, is introduced.

The performance text is condensed and fragmented in the sense that it mainly contains materials from various scenes in Act 1 of Ibsen's play and elaborates extensively on the scene with Women in Green (Scene 5) and the Troll scene (Scene 6) in the second act. The end is based on Act 5, Scene 10.

Velicheti (2016) observes:

> Dr. Aruna Bhikshu approaches *Peer Gynt* with a unique socio-historical perspective about the traditional Bhagavatam practices in Telegu. Telugu has popular regional variations of Bhagavatam form which are practiced by Dalit (casteless group) performers… it focuses on the humor, themes of motherhood, love, and adventure.

The common focus on oppression and inequalities in 'Chindu Bhagavatam' is maintained in the performance. It can be understood as a revolt against the prevailing postcolonial power structure. The following dialogue in *Peer Gynt*, Act 2, Scene 5 (Fjelde, 1978) helps to explain the elaboration of the Women in the Green scene in the performance:

> *Women in Green*: Black looks white, and vile looks fair.
> *Peer Gynt*: Great looks small and foul looks pure.

The political notion is maintained at the very end of the performance, assumingly inspired by the following dialogue of Act 5, Scene 10 of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (Fjelde, 1978):

> *Peer Gynt*: You see here before you a decent man.
> I've always obeyed our countries laws;
> Never been booked in a station house –
> But a man can sometimes lose his foothold
> And stumble –

The end scene deals with the 'death force' and the 'life force' within one frame, with the cross as the crucial symbol. The cross contains a double meaning and is an expression of the 'in-betweenness' of the source text and the transcreated text. At the surface, the cross points to the crossroads in Ibsen's play (mainly Act 5, Scene 9) and is a symbol of encountering death. The under-the-surface meaning of the cross is political and is inspired by the description of the global situation during colonial times in *Peer Gynt* (Act 4, Scene 1) – a 'life force' in the form of a desire for freedom and dignity (Nilu, 2018). It symbolizes a revolt against the existing hierarchical and caste-based power structures in India, which for the Dalits mean that they are treated as untouchables. To escape from this kind of suppression, Dalits often converted to Christianity (Clarke, Manchala, & Peacock, 2010) as a part of the colonization process. In postcolonial times, Dalits have on their own initiative converted as a revolt against the prevailing caste hierarchy and the continued suppression of their human dignity.

3.2.5 Learning from the Peer Gynt Cycle

It is a common feature of the four *Peer Gynt* productions that the text makes up merely a minor aspect of the performance body and that Ibsen's textual body is fully shadowed by the theatrical forms. As for the 'Lokadharmi' productions described in the previous chapter, the structure of the source text could not be maintained. The source text is heavily adapted and reduced to adjust to the strict performance rules and the basic principles of the Sanskrit theatre.

The relative flexibility of the 'Yakshagana' and 'Chindu Bhagavatam' theatrical forms, combined with the selection of subject matters that fit with the respective forms, makes the encountering process somewhat easier than is the case with the two other productions, and it was possible to create liminality while maintaining crucial characteristics of the forms. For the two other *Peer Gynt* productions, major conventions of the theatrical forms had to be broken to blend with Ibsen's text. This was in one case (*Pethannasami thalutta*) done by merging two different types of Sanskrit theatrical forms, one high-brow and one low-brow form. In the 'Kudiyattam' production, the director picked some

material from the traditional performance body which could be adjusted and used in parallel with modern Western objects. This approach makes the production contemporary within the postcolonial frame of 'India's World'.

The four productions differ in terms of content. The fact that the play itself is a 'fragmented body', containing many layers and action lines, provides the directors with a space for selectivity where they could pick subject matters that fit with the theatrical forms applied as well as with their visions for the performances, including how to make them contemporary. The interplay between these two aspects defines the overall content of the productions. All four *Peer Gynt* productions contain a political notion, with subject matters leaning towards universalistic or existential issues. The 'Yakshagana' production is focused, and the subject matter is limited to Peer's desire and self-reflection. It fits well with the form, and the episodic structure of the theatrical form is maintained. The postcolonial notion, in the form of a critic of the religion-based notion of 'Indianness', is indirect. The overall aim of the composite production (*Pethannasami thalutta*) seems to be to convey the concept of 'Indianness' based on Hinduism, which dominates the political discourse in India nowadays, through the emphasis on Indian conceptions of 'Motherhood' and 'Mother India'. The 'Kudiyattam' production deals with two quite different subject matters, notably the inner life of Peer (and his relationships to the women characters), and the distortion of nature. Also in this production, the postcolonial notion is related to 'Indianness' but the aim is the opposite of the political notion of the composite production, notably to establish a diversity approach. The political notion of *Peer Gynt* in the 'Chindu Bhagavatam' folk form is strong and explicit. In contrast to the three other *Peer Gynt* productions, it is community-based as it focuses on the conditions of the oppressed Dalits.

Since there is little room for text in in the theatrical forms used in the *Peer Gynt* productions, communication with the audience is dominated by symbolical expressions through gestures, mime, colours, music, and movement. The dominance of non-verbal language is likely to make it more difficult for spectators not acquainted with Sanskrit aesthetics to fully understand the content of the performances.

4. Opening doors

The examples above show that Ibsen's dramatic structure is lost through the cultural encountering processes. In all cases, the source text is substantially reduced, and 'narrowed' in the sense that only topics and dialogues adjustable with the form are picked and reinterpreted. The 'lost body' is the result of sensible selection and distribution of elements and materials along with their reasoning throughout this negotiation process. The performance text makes up only a small portion of the theatrical whole and it is used in a fragmentary way, like 'broken mirror' images. This is a common phenomenon within Ibsen's practice when his texts are intermingled with traditional and folk theatrical forms in non-western countries. Due to other forms of verbal communication than dialogue and non-verbal performance techniques, it can be argued that productions succeeded in resounding the content of Ibsen's texts as well as in maintaining Ibsen's core spirit of freedom ('all kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs').

The blending required adjustments also in how the Sanskrit theatrical forms were used in the performances. The conversion within the traditional ritualistic performance bodies resulting from negotiation with Ibsen's secular texts happened in two major ways: The traditional fixed score between word and gesture was abandoned, and the traditional prescribed structure and rules of music, dance, and narration were made more fluid. The broader relevance of the findings is that the source text is no longer serving as the controlling authority but constitutes one material, among others.

The use of the 'open door' concept means that a space for symbiotic positions of cultures is created, which makes it possible to remove the tension between 'self' and 'other' from the performance bodies. The open space enables direct encountering between Ibsen's texts, characteristics of the Sanskrit theatre tradition, and local socio-economic conditions and cultural conceptions. Transculturation processes take place whereby the macrocosm textuality from the 'modern West' is turned into microcosm performativity in South Asia.

In this way, the Ibsen productions made within the Sanskrit theatre tradition add to the prevailing approach of staging of Ibsen's plays in South Asia of focusing on critical social, political, and cultural issues. The strength and the dynamic of the performances were found in the capability of multiple forms of communication between performers and audience through a parabolic communication process. The simultaneous presence of performers and spectators created room for energy flows from spectators to performers and vice versa and thereby for enhancing the relevance of the performances. As Jill Dolan (2005) summarizes:

> the synergy of the actor's embodiment and the spectator's willing imagination creates the possibility, the

potential for new understanding and insight charged by the necessity of intersubjectivity.

The staging of Ibsen in the Sanskrit theatre tradition has created substantial knowledge that has been shared through the active participation of scholars and theatre practitioners from different parts of the world. Shared knowledge helps to reduce the tension and rigidity of positions that have typically characterized the discourse on (intercultural) theatre practice. Use of the 'open door' concept could facilitate a further motion in this direction.

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